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## Reconstructing Clerical Careers: The Experience of the Clergy of the Church of England Database

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## COMMUNICATION

# *Reconstructing Clerical Careers: The Experience of the Clergy of the Church of England Database*

by ARTHUR BURNS, KENNETH FINCHAM  
and STEPHEN TAYLOR

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*The Clergy of the Church of England Database, a project funded by the AHRB, began work in 1999 with the aim of constructing a relational database covering all clerical careers in the Church of England between 1540 and 1835. This article outlines the methodology and scope of the project before discussing some of the intellectual problems posed by the task of constructing a database that reflects the complexities of an irrational, pre-bureaucratic organisation. It also offers an insight into the potential of the completed database as a tool for investigating the largest profession of the early modern period.*

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Since the foundation of the Clergy of the Church of England Database project (CCED), its directors have occasionally been called upon to justify its academic purpose and usefulness to sceptical colleagues, who have found it difficult to understand how such a project could involve much more than copying out existing lists of clergy. As the project now approaches its final phase, it is perhaps timely to take this opportunity to reflect upon some of the considerable intellectual and methodological challenges this innovative initiative in historical computing has presented, and the opportunities it will present as an important new tool for research into the clerical profession.

In one sense, however, the sceptics do correctly identify one characteristic of the project. For its basic aim is extremely straightforward. Much of the complexity that is involved in the construction of the database will be all but invisible in the finished project. At least, it is hoped that it will be invisible, as

Versions of this paper have been given at seminars and conferences at Edinburgh, the German Historical Institute in London, Lampeter, Oxford and Cumberland Lodge. We are grateful to the organisers of these events for their invitations to speak and to the participants for their many valuable comments and observations.

one of the attractions of a relational database is the ability to present a large amount of complex material clearly and simply. But as will be apparent from what follows, complexity there certainly is. This discussion will concentrate primarily on the mechanics of the project and some of the problems that are being encountered. It will say more about method than about aims. But it will probably be helpful first of all briefly to outline what the database project does seek to achieve.

### *What is the CCED?*

The CCED was awarded a grant of £529,000 over five years by the AHRB in 1999 and commenced operations in October that year. The idea of the project had been developed over a number of years in discussions between Ken Fincham of the University of Kent at Canterbury, Arthur Burns of King's College London and Stephen Taylor of the University of Reading. In the final proposal Harold Short of the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at KCL developed the technical side of the project, and he and his colleagues have been responsible for software design and support ever since, both of which have involved considerable challenges of their own which there is not space to explore here.<sup>1</sup> One of the distinctive features of the project is its reliance on a variety of collaborations, and at its heart is that between UKC, KCL and Reading. Another is its work with a wider historical public throughout the country that is collecting the data from the forty or so record offices and libraries with which the project is collaborating, already discussed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the project is to create a relational database covering all clerical careers in the Church of England between 1540 and 1835, to be made available in electronic form for (free) public access over the world-wide web. This resource, once created, has tremendous potential as a tool for a wide range of research, both academic and non-academic. Over the period to be studied, between the Henrician Reformation and the creation of the first reliable national sources of statistics and information covering the Church of

<sup>1</sup> The project team is headed by Arthur Burns of King's College London, Kenneth Fincham of the University of Kent and Stephen Taylor of the University of Reading. Mary Clayton and Tim Wales, currently based at the University of Reading, are the Senior Research Officers. (This post was held by Peter Yorke until January 2003.) The technical side of the project is based in the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at King's College London, where it is managed by Harold Short (Technical Director), John Bradley (Technical Consultant) and Hafed Walda (Technical Project Officer).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Burns, Kenneth Fincham and Stephen Taylor, 'The historical public and academic archival research: the experience of the *Clergy of the Church of England database*', *Archives* xxvii (2002), 110–19.

England,<sup>3</sup> this institution was the single most important employer of educated males in England and Wales. An understanding of the dynamics of the clerical profession, both as experienced by individuals and in terms of the development of a profession, is thus of considerable importance not only to religious history, but also to a wide variety of other social, political and cultural histories. Recent decades have seen a renewed emphasis placed by historians of the period on the political salience of religion and the Church's relationship with the State, and this is hardly surprising, given that the Church possessed an institutional presence that surpassed that of the state. But much of that presence was a local presence, the allocation of a clergyman to every one of the 10,000 or so parishes that covered England and Wales. Partly in consequence of this, producing an effective account of the functioning of the clerical profession at a national level has hitherto been exceptionally difficult.

The relevant archives are both geographically dispersed and of a disparate nature. The records of the dioceses of the Church, the most relevant administrative level, are held in twenty-eight different repositories.<sup>4</sup> This presents a problem in fact not only for national studies, but also for the local researcher, genealogist or biographer, trying to trace an individual career. Not only does the researcher need to know his or her way around complex records in one location, the administrative logic of whose creation is often opaque, but finding which location to begin with may also be difficult. Moreover, if a particular clergyman moves from one diocese to another, as most did in this period, he will simply vanish from the local record, leaving no clue as to where he went next. But for the national researcher the problems are equally challenging, and as a result at the moment we have no really sound basis for systematic investigation of this most important of the professions – even for such basic issues as its size, the extent of various abuses, or career patterns. One of the questions that first prompted the Directors' interest in the project was one often asked by colleagues: how many clergy were there in the eighteenth century? The honest answer is that we simply do not know.

<sup>3</sup> The choice of precise dates was partly a matter of convenience. 1540 was selected as the point in the Henrician Reformation at which new administrative structures were created for the Church of England by the creation of new dioceses. 1835, the date of the publication of the Ecclesiastical Duties and Revenues Report offering a snapshot survey of the state of the Church of England at the time, also represents a convenient point on the eve of both the wholesale re-drawing of diocesan and parochial boundaries of the nineteenth century and of the regular publication of national clergy lists that were the forerunners of *Crockford's*.

<sup>4</sup> In most cases the diocesan records are held together in a single repository. The exceptions are London (where the records are divided between the Guildhall Library and London Metropolitan Archives), Canterbury (Lambeth Palace Library and Canterbury Cathedral Archives) and Chester (Cheshire Record Office, Lancashire Record Office and the West Yorkshire Archives Service, Leeds). The records of all four Welsh dioceses – Bangor, Llandaff, St Asaph and St Davids – are held at the National Library of Wales.

Contemporary estimates vary from 10,000 to 20,000, and modern efforts to provide a more precise figure are based on little more than intelligent surmise and deduction. It is not even clear, in the early eighteenth century, whether the parishes were short of staff or overrun by a glut of clergy.

The CCED aims to capitalise on the fact that, for all these difficulties, the diocesan authorities maintained accurate local documentary records of all major career events involving the clergy. This enables us to create a single resource bringing together the most important data contained in all the diocesan record offices (and a significant number of other repositories<sup>5</sup>). The database will record events rather than contain prose biographies, and will enable a wide variety of data retrieval and analysis. Users will be able to view the succession of clergy in particular localities, or investigate more complex issues such as patterns of clerical migration and patronage (for example, the number and role of women patrons). It should for the first time be possible systematically to investigate the changing size, educational background and career patterns of the English clergy. Curates, in particular, are often elusive in the records, which is why they were habitually ignored by earlier generations compiling lists of diocesan clergy; but, by recovering them, we can now analyse their composition and significance, and establish whether or not a curacy was an automatic first step in a clerical career or more usually admission to an impoverished clerical proletariat.

The record linkage undertaken by the project will enable users to trace individual careers as they cross diocesan boundaries. Different users will have different needs, so it is intended that a variety of 'front ends' will enable users to approach the data in different ways. For simple local enquiries a standard interface will be available; a more complex search screen will enable sophisticated questions to be asked. A variety of different guides to using the database will help users to gain maximum benefit and explain both the potential and the (sometimes considerable) limitations of the data. It is envisaged that users will range from academic researchers doing a study of, say, the archdeaconry of Buckingham, to the expatriate genealogist seeking information on his great-great-great grandfather. Of course, while the project directors are very clear that what they are creating is essentially a research tool, they do intend to be among the users of the database

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the diocesan repositories listed in n. 4, the project is using collections at the British Library, the National Archives, the Bodleian Library, Christ Church Library, Dorset Record Office (Wimborne peculiar), Durham Cathedral Library, Exeter Cathedral Library, Gloucester Cathedral Library, Hereford Cathedral Library, Lincoln Cathedral Library, Medway Archives Office (Strood), Nottingham University Library, Peterborough Cathedral Library, St George's Chapel Archives, St James's Palace, Salisbury Cathedral Library, Shropshire Record Office (Bridgnorth peculiar), Southwell Minster Library (now removed to Nottinghamshire Archives Office), Wells Cathedral Library, Westminster Abbey Library, Winchester Cathedral Library, Worcester Cathedral Library and York Minster Library.

themselves and are planning to write a major study examining the development of the clerical profession over three centuries, which will obviously draw heavily on analysis of the data that has been collected.

### *Methodology*

As has been said, what makes this project possible is the remarkably good survival of the records of the twenty-seven dioceses of England and Wales.<sup>6</sup> Scotland was excluded on the grounds that it had a separate established Church, presbyterian rather than episcopal, for most of the period.<sup>7</sup> The decision to exclude the Church of Ireland was more difficult, as there was a considerable interchange of clergy. But, for almost all of the period covered by the database, it was constitutionally distinct and, more important, the vagaries of record survival would have made what is already an enormous task much more difficult.<sup>8</sup> The project exploits an enormous variety of records, but it relies very heavily on a core of four types of record maintained by diocesan and archidiaconal officers: registers, subscription books, licensing books<sup>9</sup> and *libri cleri* or call books. Registers record the ordination of clergy, the point at which they 'became' clergymen, and the appointment of beneficed clergy to their livings. They and licensing books also record the appointment, or licensing, of unbeneficed clergy or curates and preachers, appointments of schoolmasters, resignations, and other similar events. At the time of their ordination and appointment, clergy were also required to subscribe to various oaths – these events are recorded in subscription books, which thus provide another source for many events recorded in registers, but

<sup>6</sup> Since no bishops for the colonies were consecrated until Charles Inglis was made bishop of Nova Scotia in 1787, the database will include at least the ordination records for all the British colonies, including those of mainland North America. (Samuel Seabury had been consecrated as the first bishop for the newly independent United States of America three years earlier in 1784.) We are, none the less, hoping to be able to include links with the detailed database of colonial American clergy compiled by James Bell.

<sup>7</sup> A list of the clergy of the Scottish episcopal Church has been published: David M. Bertie, *Scottish episcopal clergy, 1689–2000*, Edinburgh 2000.

<sup>8</sup> There is a project to publish lists of clergy of the Church of Ireland, originally compiled by James Blennerhassett Leslie during the first half of the twentieth century. Four volumes have appeared hitherto, and it would clearly be desirable to include in the database cross references to these volumes where appropriate: *Clergy of Connor*, ed. James Leslie, Belfast 1994; *Clergy and parishes of Down and Dromore*, ed. Fred Rankin, Belfast 1996; *Clergy of Derry and Raphoe*, ed. Frederick W. Fawcett and David W. T. Crooks, Belfast 1999; *Clergy of Dublin*, ed. W. J. R. Wallace, Belfast 2001.

<sup>9</sup> By the early nineteenth century, partly in response to parliamentary legislation, the licensing books that were typical of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been superseded by printed curates' licences, which were often bound together in volumes. These volumes become a standard feature of diocesan records from 1813.

## Appointment Record

LINKED TO PERSON: **Levit, Henricus 1617-1632** \* VACANCY DATA CCE RECORD ID: 15360

CLERIC DETAIL	EVENT TYPE	SOURCE
<b>Surname</b> Levitt	<b>Type</b> Institution	PRO, Rochester22 (Exchequer Account of First Fruits)
<b>Forename</b> Henry	<b>Date</b> 11/11/1617	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Office</b> Perpetual Vicar	
<b>Qualification</b> MA	<b>Clerical Status</b>	
<b>University</b>	<b>Location</b> Reyherseff	
<b>College</b>		
<b>Year</b>		
		<b>ORDINARY / JURISDICTION</b>
		Buckeridge, John/Rochester 1611-1628
		<b>COMMENT</b>

## PATRON DETAILS

<b>Patron Type</b> Lay	<b>PATRON SURNAME</b> Walton	<b>TITLE</b> Armiger	<b>FORENAME</b> Thomas	<b>GENDER</b> Male	<b>GUARDIAN</b> Missing	<b>RESID. OFFICE</b>
<b>Patron Role</b> own right						
<b>Gender</b> Male						

Figure 1.

## Ordination Evidence Detail

LINKED TO PERSON: **Bate, Richard 1696-1698** CCE RECORD ID: 6637

CLERIC DETAIL	EVENT TYPE	SOURCE
<b>Surname</b> Bate	<b>Ev. Entitl.</b> 'having a good testimonial'	CKS, DRb/A/1. (Act Book)
<b>Forename</b> Richard	<b>Type</b> ordination	
<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b> 18/9/1698	
<b>Qualification</b> BA	<b>Place</b> Bromley	
<b>University</b> Oxford	<b>Church</b> parish church	
<b>College</b> All Souls	<b>Clerical Status</b> priest	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Letters</b> No	
	<b>Dimissory</b>	
		<b>BISHOP</b>
		Sprat, Thomas/Rochester 1684-1713
		<b>COMMENT</b>
		D, Rochester, 20/09/96

Figure 2.

which are particularly valuable for their often much more complete records of appointments of curates and preachers. *Libri cleri* are essentially lists of the clergy of a diocese or archdeaconry, drawn up for use at visitations. They are invaluable for periods for which registers and subscription books have not survived and for identifying further curates. Some important information will, however, be missing from the database. It is not feasible, at least in this phase of the project, routinely to incorporate information from parish registers, wills or monumental inscriptions, so in most cases precise dates of birth and death will not be included, though there will be approximate dates.

For inputting these records a series of screens has been developed, each providing fields appropriate for the information that we wish to extract from that particular source and designed in classic 'index-card' format. Thus, there are separate screens for inputting data relating to appointments and ordinations from registers, for subscription books and for *libri cleri*. Similar screens will be used to display records on the web site, through which the database will be made available to the academic community and the public (see Figs 1 and 2). It has been possible to adapt these screens to all the various



sources, from clerical subsidy records to letters of orders, that are being used for the project. The biggest challenge here – but one that has been surmounted – was to adapt them for inputting exhibit books. These books resemble *libri cleri*, but were annotated by the bishops or their officials during the visitation with the details of the instruments produced by the clergy, that is the clergy's papers detailing their ordination and appointment. These presented particular problems. Whereas the register or subscription book records the date of an event and the record was created at the time of the event, an exhibit book is a document that contains the records of many events that took place at various times in the past.

Completed collection databases – generally one for each source – are returned to the project office for checking and then uploading into the master database. It is important to note that the project team made a decision that it should always be possible for researchers to access the original records – in the format illustrated – so that it will always be possible to see on what basis judgements have been made about the next stage of the project, record linkage. Indeed, as all the records – and we estimate that the database will contain about 1.5 million of them by the time the AHRB-funded stage of this project is completed – contain details of the original source, it will be possible for researchers easily to return to that original in the case of doubt or confusion.

The next stage of the project, then, is record linkage. This is a multi-faceted and multiple stage process, not all of which is included in the AHRB project. It is a multi-faceted process in that records will be linked by person, by place and by ordinary (or bishop). The latter two of these are relatively straightforward. Person linkage, however, is much more difficult, more time-consuming, and far more demanding in terms of the academic skills required. At present, it is planned only to link the clergy, and the results of that process can be seen in the demonstration web site containing the Rochester data.<sup>10</sup> It involves a process called 'personification', a – perhaps appropriately – God-like process in which 'people' are created, each being given an individual identifier, to which the individual evidence records are then linked. Variations in spelling, etc, mean that this process will become more difficult as we move from diocese to diocese and the number of 'people' in the master database increases. In this stage of the project it is not planned to link patrons – another group of individuals identified in the database, some of whom of course will also be clergy – but it is obviously both desirable and possible to do this at a later stage.

Linkage, or to be more precise the linkage of people, is also a multiple stage process. What can be seen in Fig. 3 is an example of the results of the

<sup>10</sup> This can be accessed through the project's web site: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/humanities/cch/ccce>. As the records for further dioceses are linked, they will also be made available through this web site.

**Taynton, Francis (1756-1794)**

CCE PERSON ID: 557

## COMMENTS

In Foster

S Nathaniel of Cowbridge Glamorgan gent, JESUS m 13/12/1749 aged 18; BA 1753, MA 1756 v Farley, Kent at d 1794.

## EVIDENCE

VIEW	YEAR	TYPE	NAME AS RECORDED	LOCATION	OFFICE
②	1756	Ord (ordination)	Taynton, Francis	/	priest
②	1764	Appt (Collation)	Taynton, Francis	Frensbury als Frinsbury or Frensbury /	Vicar
②	1776	Libc	Taynton, Francis	Trotterscliffe /	Rector
②	1776	Libc	Taynton, Francis	West Farleigh /	Vicar
②	1776	Libc	Taynton, Francis	Frensbury /	Vicar
②	1779	Vac (cession)	Taynton, Francis	Frensbury otherwise Frensbury /	Vicar
②	1779	Appt (Permission to continue in post)	Taynton, Francis	West Farleigh /	Vicar
②	1779	Appt (Institution)	Taynton, Francis	West Farleigh /	Vicar
②	1779	Appt (Collation)	Taynton, Francis	Trotterscliffe otherwise Trotscilff /	Rector
②	1794	Vac (Death)	Taynton, Francis	West Farleigh /	Vicar
②	1794	Vac (Death)	Taynton, Francis	West Farleigh /	Vicar
②	1794	Vac (Death)	Taynton, Francis	Trotterscliffe otherwise Trotterscliffe alias Tross /	Rector

Figure 3.

first stage of that process for the diocese of Rochester, and that is as far as the process will go in this AHRB-funded stage of the project. But it has some significant limitations, as, for some events in some clergymen's careers, there will only be one record, while for others there will be two, three or even more. Thus, an ordination may be represented by details of the ordination itself, the clergyman's subscription on ordination and letters dimissory issued by the bishop of another diocese authorising the ordination. For another clergyman, only the last of these might survive. What is planned, therefore, as the second stage of linkage, is to reduce these records to a single record providing all the details of the ordination. By doing this systematically, a series of 'database accounts' of the careers of individual clergymen will be provided, and it is these accounts that will facilitate the kind of structural analysis of the profession that we see as such an important part of the justification for the database – and, indeed, that is absolutely crucial for the kind of study that we are planning to write on the basis of it.

*Problems and opportunities*

What has been said so far about the workings of the project has provided some insight into the major opportunities, or benefits, deriving from the database for a range of historians. In the final section of this paper we shall highlight a few of the problems and challenges that the project has faced, how we have responded to them, and some of the often unexpected opportunities that they have opened up.

(1) One of the most unexpected problems has been the sheer variety of ecclesiastical records. Remarkably little attention has been given to the post-Reformation records of the Church of England, many of which were deposited in local record offices at the point at which the historical profession began to lose interest in the kind of institutional history that underpinned the great cataloguing and printing of state records from the mid-nineteenth

century. All three project directors had used these records in their earlier researches and thought that they knew about them; all were familiar with Dorothy Owen's invaluable *Records of the Established Church*.<sup>11</sup> But, as we moved from record office to record office surveying the records, in a way that no one before has attempted systematically, we came to realise that her account was based essentially on the records of the dioceses of Ely and Lincoln and did not necessarily reflect administrative forms and practices elsewhere. What we found by contrast was a remarkable variety of local and regional practices, with different kinds of records and different forms being used from diocese to diocese.

This created problems in the design of the inputting screens, and drove both the project directors and the computing team to distraction. The problem was highlighted during the project directors' visit to Norwich, the tenth diocese to be surveyed, during which they found a new type of appointment record, unique to the diocese and which was for the purposes of the project designated as the 'Norwich union' – a temporary but formal union of two benefices for the incumbency of an individual cleric on the authority of the diocesan bishop. The fact that the 'Norwich union' was found to be illegal by a court case in the nineteenth century was of little comfort, as its use throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries forced the project team to think again about how to record institutions and collations in the diocese.

More positively, such discoveries and surprises have offered a new perspective on the organisation of the Church of England, the importance of locality, the role of bishops in diocesan administration and, more generally, a tantalising insight into pre-bureaucratic administrative practice. There is a fascinating study to be written here, but there is much that we still do not understand even about the project's core records. In the course of our surveys of the records of various dioceses, for example, it has often proved impossible to work out the relationship between two or three overlapping sets of subscription books, all of which cover the same period. Even more intriguing has been evidence of the ability of officials, often many years later, to know precisely where to look to find specific information.

(2) It is premature to talk much about the results of the project, but even the processes of surveying the records and completing the limited amount of record linkage achieved so far have highlighted some new insights. One of the most fascinating of these is the significance of locality, the dynamics of local clerical communities and the way in which those dynamics changed through our period. A good example of this is the area around Southwell in Nottinghamshire, where there was (and still is) a minster church staffed by

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Owen, *The records of the Established Church in England excluding parochial records*, London 1970.

a chapter of canons and assisted by minor canons. Like the canons of many cathedrals, the Southwell chapter owned the patronage to a significant number of livings (around forty) and exercised peculiar jurisdiction over about twenty. Most of these livings were concentrated in the immediate vicinity. We have already begun to be able to piece together the ways in which the Southwell chapter used its patronage to ensure that minor canons had an adequate income, while at the same time providing adequate pastoral care for some of the poorer livings in its gift. The picture that emerges is one of a remarkably close-knit clerical community in southern Nottinghamshire, centred on Southwell and in which most clergy had some connection with the minster. As agricultural incomes rose in the later eighteenth century, however, the dynamics of this community changed, as minor canons began to resign on being appointed to now relatively lucrative country parishes in the gift of the chapter, posing problems for the canons in maintaining adequate pastoral provision within the minster.

A second area where it is clear that the database will also make a major contribution is in our understanding of the survival of the Church through the 1640s and 1650s, the years of civil war and republic. We know a great deal about those Anglican clergy who 'suffered' in this period and as much, if not more, about those who could not conform to the restored Church in 1660–2.<sup>12</sup> We know much less, however, about the 'vicar of Bray' figures who survived regime changes. It is worth remembering that at least four-fifths of the clergy in post in 1660 conformed to the Restoration Church; their experiences were far more typical than the well-known sufferings of the excluded. But the database is already accumulating a great deal of evidence about precisely this group.<sup>13</sup> Much information has been input about Anglican ordinations during the 1650s, a surprising number of which were of clergy who had been appointed to livings by the interregnum regimes and were clearly officiating as presbyterians or independents. But we are also throwing light on those who began their careers in the early 1640s, were appointed to livings in the 1650s and then sought episcopal ordination in 1660 or 1661. Equally, there are many who were episcopally ordained before the civil war, who were instituted into livings in the mid-1650s having

<sup>12</sup> A. G. Matthews, *Calamy revised being a revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the ministers and others ejected and silenced, 1660–2*, Oxford 1934, and *Walker revised being a revision of John Walker's Sufferings of the clergy during the Grand Rebellion, 1642–60*, Oxford 1948.

<sup>13</sup> The most important source here is the exhibit books compiled during visitations in the decade or so after 1660. The value of these documents was recognised by S. L. Ollard ('Commonwealth ordinations', *Theology* xlv [1942], 37–9). But, with the notable exception of W. J. Sheils (*Restoration exhibit books and the northern clergy, 1662–1664*, York 1987) little work has been done on them since then, and there has certainly been no attempt to use them systematically. Such records survive for the early years of the Restoration Church in around one-third of the English and Welsh dioceses.

evidently accommodated themselves to the Cromwellian regime, but who then continued to serve their cures into the 1660s and beyond.

(3) If, however, we turn to look at issues of database design and the point of contact between academic and technical concerns, probably the most difficult problem has been one of the least expected – and least expected, perhaps, because it is not directly concerned with the reconstruction of clerical careers. It concerns the issue of location. Location was mentioned earlier in this article as one of the elements of the records that is being linked in the master database, and some of the results can be seen on the Rochester test web site, where it is possible to view the records relating to a specific church living in the diocese. What happens on the screen, however, is misleadingly simple. What is most often apparent is a series of linked records relating to a particular parish. Early on in the project, a decision was made to use the parish as the basic unit of location. The project team remains convinced that this was the right decision, but the implications of it became very complicated as soon as they started to think about the structures that would have to be constructed to enable researchers to run complex searches of the kind that would enable them to look at groups of clergy.

The reason for this may not be immediately apparent. After all, most people are aware that the Church of England is an hierarchical structure, grouping its parishes into archdeaconries, then dioceses and then provinces. Of course, parishes can also be treated as units of secular government and grouped into counties. This was relatively easy to deal with, and we quickly moved to a model which would allow us to link our parishes both to archdeaconries/dioceses and also to counties. The real problem lay with the former, as we began to grapple with the problem of peculiars, or parishes and groups of parishes that lay outside the jurisdiction of the bishop. Researchers, therefore, might be interested in the archdeaconry or diocese either as a jurisdictional unit (excluding peculiars) or as a geographical area (including peculiars). The problems were complicated further by the fact that some peculiars (as in Norfolk, for example) were large and could not rationally be incorporated geographically within an archdeaconry. The answer has been to develop a structure that groups parishes in three ways – by county, by geographical diocese/archdeaconry, and by jurisdictional diocese/archdeaconry – and allows the project to treat large peculiars as ‘virtual’ archdeaconries in its jurisdictional hierarchy.

The problems with location did not end there, however, as we also had to deal with the fact that many ecclesiastical locations do not fit easily into a structure which regards the parish as its basic unit. Easiest to deal with, perhaps, were chapelries – units within a parish which were, normally at least, regarded as being dependent on the parish. These have been treated as subunits of the parish, even though some parishes in London or the north might contain ten or more chapelries at any one time. More challenging are the various ‘locations’ that simply bear no relation to

parish structures – schools, workhouses, gaols, ships in the Royal Navy and regiments in the army. Not much less challenging was accommodating within this structure the cathedrals and the wide variety of clergy holding offices in them.

Remarkably, perhaps, no clear account exists anywhere of the structure of the Church of England. There is no reliable account of peculiar jurisdictions, no clear account of the foundation and closure of chapelries, and even no clear record of the changing parochial structure of England and Wales. So part of the work that we have been doing is creating an account of the ecclesiastical structure of England and Wales and describing changes in that structure through the period 1540–1835. As we have done this, we have been ever more relieved that we selected a terminal date for the project that is before the mass creation of new parishes and new dioceses in the nineteenth century. There is no doubt that grappling with this task, and with the related difficulties of mapping the geographical structure of a pre-bureaucratic, irrational, medieval institution into a highly structured database, has been one of the most challenging intellectual and technical problems that we have faced so far. And the benefits have been difficult to discern, though we can take some satisfaction in the fact that one of the by-products of the project will be a far more accurate account of the geography and jurisdictional structure of the early modern Church of England than has existed hitherto.

The constraints of a brief paper such as this only allow consideration of some aspects of the project. But it is hoped that it has conveyed not only the potential benefits of the project, once it has been completed, for the investigation of the largest profession of the early modern period, but also some of the intellectual challenges posed by the apparently straightforward task of creating a database of this kind. At the very least, we hope that the paper has demonstrated that the project is about more than merely copying out lists of the clergy.